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ABSTRACT

In response to community concern about developmental effects on children who play with toys that portray antisocial, violent, or militaristic themes, two government committees were set up to investigate the issue. Psychologists have argued that playing with such toys may increase antisocial and aggressive behavior in children and have long-term effects on children's development of attitudes towards others and towards society in general. A review of research on children's play shows that there is little evidence to support such arguments. Reasons for lack of research are discussed in terms of: (1) problems of establishing criteria for defining 'antisocial,' 'violent,' and 'war toys'; (2) failure to collect and evaluate anecdotal evidence from parents, teachers, and clinicians about the toys; and (3) inappropriate argumentative use of evidence from research into effects on children of violent television programs. Problems associated with play research in general include: (1) difficulties in attributing motives to observable play behavior; (2) the likelihood the children's spontaneous play will be suppressed in an experimental situation; and (3) age and sociocultural differences in the significance of certain games and play behaviors in childhood. It is maintained that even without specific research, a case for negative consequences can be made. (RH)

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WHAT DO WE KNOW REALLY ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF TOYS ON CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR AND DEVELOPMENT?

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE FIFTH AUSTRALIAN DEVELOPMENTAL CONFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

WHAT DO WE KNOW REALLY ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF TOYS ON CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR AND DEVELOPMENT?

In response to widespread community concern about the likely developmental effects on children who play with toys and play materials which portray antisocial, violent and / or militaristic themes, two separate government committees were set up to investigate the issue [Commonwealth Committee of Inquiry into Victim Toys (1987) and the Victorian Ministry of Consumer Affairs' Special Committee of Inquiry into Antisocial Toys (1987 - 1988)]. Psychologists have argued that playing with such toys may increase antisocial and aggressive behaviour in children and may have long term effects on their development of attitudes towards others and the values & beliefs they acquire about society in general. A review of research on children's play, shows that there is little evidence to support such arguments. Reasons for the lack of research are discussed in terms of:

(a) problems relating to antisocial & violent / war toys in particular, those of:-

(i) establishing criteria for defining 'antisocial', 'violent' & 'war' toys.

(ii) failure to collect & evaluate systematically anecdotal evidence from parents, teachers & clinicians about these toys.

(iii) inappropriate use of evidence from research into the effects on children of violent television programmes, in arguments about toys & play.

(b) problems associated with play research in general, including :-

(i) difficulties in attributing motives to observable play behaviour.

(ii) likelihood of supressing spontaneous, child structured play in an experimental situation.

(iii) age & sociocultural differences in the significance of certain games & play behaviour in childhood.

In the absence of specific research, it is plausible nevertheless, to present a case in support of the negative behavioural & developmental consequences of playing with these toys. From our knowledge of learning theory, it could be argued that playing with these toys may reinforce already existing antisocial & aggressive behavioural tendencies in some children, they provide the means by which children may imitate & model antisocial & violent behaviour unlikely to be observed in their everyday lives and they serve to desensitise children to the violence, injury & disability they depict.

However, it remains for psychologists to undertake research which will produce evidence that enables us to predict with confidence, the most likely effects of playing with antisocial & war toys on the behaviour & development of children. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

WHAT DO WE KNOW REALLY ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF TOYS ON CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR AND DEVELOPMENT ?

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1.0 BACKGROUND

In recent years there have been moves to prevent or restrict the availability of certain toys for children. Sweden was the first to prohibit the manufacture, importation and sale of 'war toys'. In 1978 the Swedish parliament passed a resolution which declared war toys 'unethical' and advised that their sale be restricted. Both Finland and Norway have similar prohibitions. As well, the European parliament in 1982 published its 'Resolution on War Toys'. The document is an indictment of the increased production and availability of war toys in certain of its member countries. Most recently, in 1987 in Australia two separate government committees of inquiry were set up to:

1. Investigate the availability of certain types of toys and likely psychological effects of these toys on the children who play with them.

2. Recommend to governments what actions should be taken to restrict or prohibit their availability.

One committee (Commonwealth Committee of Inquiry into Victim Toys), investigated the most recent class of antisocial toys - 'victim toys' which portray a range of injuries, disfigurements and disabilities or antisocial or violent acts in different doll like figures. The other committee (Victorian Ministry of Consumer Affairs Special Committee of Inquiry into Victim Toys), as well as looking at the victim toys, investigated more common class of antisocial toys - i.e. violent toys and war toys. Both these committees of Inquiry, recommended forms of voluntary restrictions on importation, sale and manufacture of both victim toys (in the case of the Commonwealth inquiry) and victim and all other categories of antisocial toys (in the case of the Victorian committee). These recommendations were based on opinion, reached by each committee, that each class of these toys had the potential to cause psychological harm to the children who played with them.

2.0 ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING CONCERN

Most of these moves to prohibit or restrict the sale of these categories of toys to children are motivated by concern for the detrimental effects these toys are perceived to have on children's behaviour and future attitudes and values. For example, the E.E.C. 'Resolution on War Toys', argues that 'there is a danger in giving, through war toys, a liking for weapons'. The Finnish restrictions of playthings that imitate modern warfare were based on the opinion that such toys were 'detrimental for (sic) the well being and development of children'. In the case of the Australian committees of inquiry, the inquiry into 'victim toys', recommended voluntary prohibitions and restrictions on the sale of these toys to children because of their assumed potential for psychological harm to certain vulnerable children. The Victorian committee of inquiry into antisocial toys, generally formed the opinion that there was reasonable evidence of 'causal links between antisocial toys and psychological harm'. Most of the aforementioned 'efforts' are perceived to be taken in the interest of children's psychological well being. Central to this opinion is the idea that children's play is an important aspect of their psychological development. Thus, those activities, objects and materials used and the environment in which they play - all should be inviolable. If we are able to identify what are psychological harmful playthings for children, then we should be able to identify those toys and play materials that will foster psychological adjustment. Most of these documents and declarations contain statements e.g. 'towards better toys', 'developing toy and play culture' (Finnish), 'toys should show the values, hopes and challenges of a positive, caring world' (Victorian)and 'direct responsibility of parents and teachers in the upbringing of children and in the creation through play, of an harmonious atmosphere in which a child's personality can develop' (E.E.C.).

3.0 EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF ASSUMPTIONS

What all these initiatives have in common is an assumption that toys in general have an effect on the (play) behaviour of children. In particular, the violent and/or antisocial actions and themes portrayed in these toys, are in some way perceived to be related to increased aggression and antisocial behaviour in the children who play with them. A review of the literature on children's play shows that there is very little empirical evidence to support these claims.

From the literature that exists, two papers are more significant:

1. Turner and Goldsmith (1976) studied the effects of playing with toy guns and airplanes on children's antisocial (i.e. aggression and rule breaking behaviours) in 4 - 5 year preschool children. They found a consistently higher rate of antisocial behaviour in the 'guns condition' than in either 'usual toys condition' or 'airplane condition'. Antisocial behaviours included pushing, verbal abuse and hitting etc. The impact of this study is diminished by the small sample size and its failure to consider sex differences.

2. Potts, Huston and Wright (1986) studied the effects of the formal elements of television versus content on post viewing behaviour. They found that rapid action sequences were the most attention getting. Violent television content was not attention getting. In post viewing the strongest effect on behaviour was antisocial toys (Star Wars models). The toy effects were independent of television effects. No conclusions were reached concerning female subjects as all subjects were male.

In this present state of a lack of knowledge on specific effects of play on the behaviour and development of children, we must rely on our knowledge of play research in particular and developmental research in general. This is no simple task either, because it raises a whole new set of methodological and conceptual problems. Nevertheless, I shall present a plausible arguments in support of the case that victim toys, violent toys and war toys all have the potential for psychological harm to the children who play with them as follows:.

1. In the case of 'victim toys', the antisocial and unhygienic acts they portray e. g. spitting, emitting malodorous gases and the violence and disability they depict (e.g dolls and creatures upon whom children are able to simulate acts of violence which injure and/or dsfigure the 'doll'), may provide the opportunity for children to imitate such behaviours they have witnessed in their immediate environment, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of such behaviours. In the case of the more horrific acts, the exposure children receive to themes and issues not likely to be witnessed in their daily lives gives them an opportunity to perpetrate these acts symbolically, through the childish medium of play without any understanding of the long term physical and psychological consequences of permanent disability.

2. Age inappropriateness:

(a) The literality of objects and themes they portray, these toys may actually frighten and distress younger children e.g. Fein (1980 and 1985) and Rubin and Howe (1985), both have pointed out that younger children need more realistic toys to trigger action sequences in thematic elements of play. Older children (9 years and over) are more likely to incorporate realistic toys as props or thematic elements within a more elaborated social play structure (Sutton - Smith, 1985). This seems to suggest that these toys have a more pervasive influence on an older child's behaviour, perhaps even beyond the realms of play.

(b) Satirical element contained in some of these toys is beyond cognitive capacities of some of the children (in particular, 5 - 7 year olds), towards whom the marketing is directed. Children in the preoperational stages of cognitive development and in the earliest stages of concrete operations, have limited understanding of pun and satire. In fact, the very young ones may take the actions portrayed as realistic. Thus, these toys may provide additional reinforcement of incipient cruelty,

violence and other forms of aggression in young children with such behavioural tendencies.

3. Portraying physically and mentally disabled and victims of accident or violence as objects of fun may affect children's developing attitudes towards the integration of the disabled into our schools and community. Moreover, by providing mechanisms by which children can inflict these injuries on the 'dolls' ensures that behaviours are reinforced actually as well as vicariously.

4. Exposure of children to weapons and paraphernalia of modern warfare:

(a) Invests a certain power and status in warfare whilst ignoring the horrific physical and psychological consequences of war.

(b) Suggests means of conflict resolution through aggression and physical violence rather than mediation and negotiation.

4.0 WHY WE KNOW SO LITTLE

In the case of war toys, it is well known that children of ancient societies played war games with toy weapons. For example, contemporary engravings from Napeoleonic France, depict children playing war games with replica weapons. There have been two catastrophic wars this century, as well as many minor and not so minor skirmishes. Therefore, it is surprising that so little rigorous attention has been paid to finding out whether there are any links between the types of play material and games children have been exposed to and their subsequent attitudes and values they develop. The following factors may have contributed to our lack of knowledge:

1. In the case of 'victim' toys, their newness in the market place explains why there is an absence of research into the effects of these toys. As well they appear to have been a 'fad' toy whose popularity declined with their decline in promotion.

2. International moves to restrict and prohibit antisocial and war toys , as well as considerable media attention (which has often focused on anecdotes from concerned parents and teachers) has come be regarded as self evident truth as to the harmfulness of these toys. This then lessens the perceived need to support empirically, what we feel to be correct morally.

3. Inappropriate use of data from research into the effects on children's behaviour of exposure to violent television programmes, to explain the effects of violent and antisocial toys on children's play. Television and play are two different experiences for children. When children watch television, it is a relatively passive experience. They are physically immobile and often do not need to interact with the programme to understand its content. The content of most television programmes is thematic, and usually set in some

form of (social) context ('televised reality' as Murray, 1985 refers to it). The ideas are more elaborated and in this way, television is more proscriptive than toys. With toys children are more active participants. Even with realistic toys (e.g. replica weapons), children are able to make up their own plots and action sequences. The effect of toys is probably more immediate and more visceral. This opinion is supported by Potts et al. Although television may have created the level of arousal, it was the presence of the toys that elicited the behaviour.

4. There are inherent difficulties in play research. As Sutton - Smith (1985) has noted

> 'there is next to no specific work on the environment as Specific Objects. In short, although we are a technological society that points objects on and around its infants and children en masse, we have no psychological technology of objects.'

This is because in any episode of play, we need to consider a range of variables which may have influenced the play behaviour. For example, we know that other aspects of the physical environment may have influenced that behaviour, such as the number of toys and the available play space. We know also that aspects of the social environment may affect the play of children. These aspects include e.g. familiarity of playmates and parental involvement. Most importantly, characteristics of the child influence the way he/she interacts with particular toys. These characteristics include e.g., age, sex, sociocultural attributes as well as certain personality variables. All these factors lead to conceptual and methodological problems. This in turn makes it difficult to isolate what and how the individual characteristics of the player interact with elements of his/her physical and social environment to produce the behavioural outcome (play).

5.0 WHY RIGOROUS RESEARCH IS NEEDED

In the light of the above rigorous research is needed to ensure;

1. that recommendations to legislators are soundly based,

2. if toys do affect children's development, then not only do we need to restrict the exposure of children to certain toys for their psychological well being, but also to prevent the undermining of their culture.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Formal study of the relationship between play with particular toys and the psychological development of children must :

1. Account for known differences in toy preference due to age and sex.

2. Account for the physical and social aspects of the play environment (e.g. nature of the room or yard and the presence of familiar or unfamiliar adults).

3 Account for any personality and/or temperamental factors which influence particular children's susceptibility to stimuli in the play environment.

4. Establish a baseline of both aggressive and antisocial behaviour amongst the experimental groups when playing with acceptable toys in defined environments.

5. Establish whether particular toys increase the level of existing types of antisocial and aggressive behaviour in the defined environments.

6. Establish whether particular toys produce new types of antisocial and aggressive behaviour in the defined environments.

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